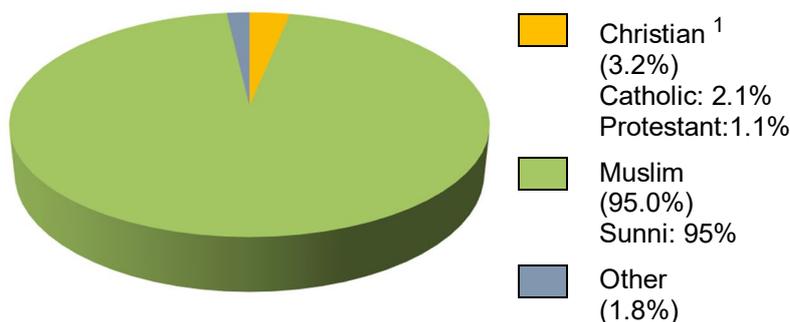


MALI



Area:	Population ² :	Political system:	Major Language(s):
1.24 million km ²	16.96 million	Democracy	French, Bambara ³

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

During the period under review, the security situation in Mali remained highly unstable. This represents a problem not least for religious minorities in a country which geographically covers a large area, a Sahel state which straddles the Sahara and the subtropics. Mali descended into chaos in March 2012 following an army coup. When Islamist jihadists and rebel groups threatened to overrun the entire country, France, the colonial ruler in Mali until 1960, intervened militarily.⁴ In early 2013, French units, supported by African troops, recaptured the north of the country. The French later handed responsibility for the mission over to the UN force, Minusma. However, France still maintains a strong anti-terror unit in Mali. On 15th May 2015, the Mali government and a proportion of the armed insurgent groups signed a peace agreement in Bamako. Further groups seeking independence signed the agreement in June 2015.⁵ A newly created Ministry of Reconciliation and Development of the North seeks to promote reconciliation among all of the country's ethnic groups. While the south is considered relatively safe, the situation in the north remains vulnerable to attack from terrorist groups with close ties to smuggling operations in the region. At the time of writing, Islamist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), continue to terrorise the region. They also see the United Nations presence as a risk to their criminal activities.⁶

In this predominantly Muslim country, most followers of Islam are Sunnis. Around five percent of the population are members of other religious communities. Of these, about two-thirds are Catholics, and the rest are Protestants. There are also followers of traditional African religions. Some Muslims and Christians incorporate indigenous traditions into the practice of their own faith.⁷

The country's constitution – considered one of the most liberal in the Muslim world – defines Mali as a secular state guaranteeing equal rights for all citizens, regardless of religion.⁸ The state's secular character is enshrined in article 2 of the constitution of 1992: "All Malians are born and live free and equal in their rights and duties. Any discrimination based on social origin, colour, language, race, sex, religion, or political opinion is prohibited." In addition, article 4 states: "Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, expression, and creation in respect to the law." Article 25 specifies: "Mali is an independent, sovereign, indivisible, democratic, secular, social Republic."

The constitution thus clearly and unequivocally guarantees the right to free exercise of faith, along with the right to expression of faith through individual or community participation in acts of worship. In the August 1991 debates that took place before the drafting and ratification of the constitution, there were a few dissenting voices speaking out in favour of a religious, Islamic state but they failed to gain ground.

Criminal law also follows this basic liberal approach. Under it, every form of religion-based discrimination is punishable by law, as are violations of the right of free exercise of religion.⁹

Incidents

The situation in the north of Mali for the civilian population and for religious minorities in particular, remains difficult. Those who still have not fled often live in constant fear. In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need on 21st April 2016, Catholic priest Father Germain, from Mopti diocese in central Mali, reported on the tense situation faced by Christians in the northern cities of Gao and Timbuktu, where the Church has been in a precarious situation since the 2012 conflict.¹⁰ He said: "There are suicide bombers, and bombs left here and there. All pastoral work is on hold for the time being. The only priest, who goes there from time to time to celebrate Mass, has to leave by plane with an armed guard. Or, if he goes by car, it takes him a whole day, as distances of at least 600 to 700 km must be covered. And there is no possibility for him of residing there permanently. No one is in control. Christian or not, everyone can be hit by the same baton."

Speaking optimistically, the priest said Christians and Muslims live peacefully "side by side" and that the rebellion was not religiously-motivated as some have suggested, but rather about the northern Azawad region's bid for independence. He added: "There are two sorts of jihadists with two different visions: There are those who joined in with the rebels in order to gain independence for Azawad, and there are those who wanted to make the whole of Mali Islamic. Incidentally, they do not see eye to eye."

The priest went on to say that proponents of *Shari'a* law in Mali "were defeated", that some were killed, others have fled to nearby countries, but that some were still in the country. These, he said, were linked to ongoing bombings and suicide attacks.

Despite the great suffering, Christian life is able to flourish in some areas of Mali. Father Germain reported that in 2015 in his diocese there were 1,400 baptisms, more than double the number in 2012. He said there were a number of conversions to Catholicism from followers of traditional religions. He also said the number of vocations in his diocese was also increasing.

Christians are repeatedly targeted by extremists, including in the southern parts of the country. According to the U.S. Department of State, on 28th September 2014 three men entered the Catholic Church of Banakabougou in the District of Bamako and threatened worshippers gathering for Mass.¹¹ The police were able to arrest one of the men. The matter never came to trial, however, as perpetrator was certified to be mentally unstable.

In May 2014, young people threw stones at Christians in Niamakoro, also located in the District of Bamako. Three suspects were arrested and charged with violation of religious freedom. The case was brought to trial in September 2014. On 10th November 2014, all three offenders were found guilty and sentenced to three months in prison.¹²

In August 2014, before the peace talks re-started in Algeria between the government and rebel groups, religious leaders – both Muslim and Catholic – spoke out against violent interpretations of Islamic law. The representatives of different faiths "jointly called for peace among all Muslims, and organised national prayers for peace."¹³

Muslim and Christian leaders routinely condemn the violence to which Christians – but very often moderate Muslims as well – are exposed. In doing so, they defend Mali’s long tradition of peaceful coexistence between different religions and denominations.

Prospects for freedom of religion

In Mali, in common with many West African countries, issues concerning religious freedom are closely linked to the evolving security situation. If jihadism and associated criminality can be curbed, the situation for the Christian minority is likely to improve. Religious coexistence has a long tradition in Mali and is still practised in many parts of the country, in spite of the violence. As such, reconciliation remains a viable option. Father Germain said: “The Catholic Church must heighten people’s awareness by telling them that even though mistakes have been made, the world is still turning.”¹⁴

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_141_2.asp

² CIA, The World Factbook 2016, estimate July 2015

³ Bambara 46.3%, Peul/Foulfoulbe 9.4%, Dogon 7.2%, Maraka/Soninke 6.4%, Malinke 5.6%, Sonrhai/Djerma 5.6%, Minianka 4.3%, Tamacheq 3.5%, Senoufo 2.6%, Bobo 2.1%, others 7% CIA, The World Factbook 2016

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13881371>

⁵ http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_1B61934C333D83BB64C2404E47D73D07/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/Mali/Innenpolitik_node.html

⁶ <http://www.dw.com/de/bundeswehr-bald-im-gef%C3%A4hrlichen-norden-von-mali/a-19166952>

⁷ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁸ <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ml/ml004en.pdf>

⁹ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

¹⁰ <https://de.zenit.org/articles/christen-in-mali-pater-germain-im-gespraech/>

¹¹ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://de.zenit.org/articles/christen-in-mali-pater-germain-im-gespraech/>